

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Choreographies of Protest Performance as Recruitment to Activism

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### *Abstract*

*This article seeks to understand why some bystanders to protest transcended to become actors in protests during the re-emergence of wide-spread student activism in an institution of higher education in South Africa during 2015. For this purpose, a performance ethnography is employed in the observation and analysis of protest performances. The article shows that in encountering an atmosphere of protest, there emerged a relation of feeling, referred to as “feeling the vibe or atmosphere”, which those who became protest performers resolved in ways which increased their capacity to act in favour of co-constituting that atmosphere. In the encounter between the body of bystanders and the atmosphere of protest, non-linear somatic communication, characterised by active and passive gestures and postures, occurred through which protest performers developed contact and connection with other bodies as a result of the displacement of space. Therefore, this article suggests that participation in activism can be about going with the flow of movement in an uncertain and ambiguous moment and is not limited to an identification with the pre-existing organisation of preferences and interests as the creativity of movement produces a social space – a performed becoming in space.*

### *Keywords*

*affect; becoming; protest song; student activism as performance; student politics*

### *Background and Context*

A majority of institutions of higher education in South Africa were sites of protest action between 2015 and 2017. What started at the University of Cape Town as #RhodesMustFall inspired proxies in other historically white institutions, such as ‘Rhodes So White’ and ‘Open Stellies’ at Rhodes University and Stellenbosch University respectively, echoing similar grievances and using similar strategies of protest such as occupations and university shutdowns (Bosch, 2017; Ngidi, Mtshixa, Diga, Mbarathi & May, 2016). The protest action that occurred in the period from 2015 to 2017 has been compared to the emergence of student activism during apartheid in both historically white and historically black institutions as students arranged and participated in coordinated protest events. Similar to their counterparts in Senegal, Kenya and South Korea during the second half of the

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20th century, South African students became the “vanguard of democratic defiance” in their actions against the administration of the apartheid state through the university (Bianchini, 2016; Macharia, 2015; Makunike, 2015; Mazrui, 1995). In the postapartheid era, there has been an increase in higher education participation rates, but access to the ‘ivory towers’ has been offset by perceptions of an institutional inability to manage massification (Cele, 2014; Luescher et al., 2015; Reddy, 2004). It could be said then that in both the apartheid and the postapartheid period, student activism in South Africa has always been about a perception students have about the management of the state through the university.

The problem of why a pre-existing discontent gains a new sense of urgency when it does and why protesting individuals act the way they do needs further exploration. How does the change in perception which seeks to remedy the status quo come into being? In this article, Rhodes University, a historically white institution which has been widely noted for its political apathy, provides the context from which to suggest that choreographies of protest performance have the power to affect an individual to transform from spectator to actor in protest.

### *Method*

This research has employed qualitative research methods in the phenomenological paradigm to draw out a performance ethnography informed by observation and semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Qualitative research is concerned with the experiences of individuals and groups in their interactions and usage of various communication styles, and the analysis of documents, such as images, film and music, which capture those experiences (Angrosino, 2007). In response to student activism research traditions, there was a search for patterns in experience through observation and the search for explication through interviews.

There is no universally accepted technique to conducting an observation, but note-taking is common practice amongst ethnographers. Various ethnographers posit that observation is a whole body perception as information is registered beyond what the eyes can see but speaks to all the senses (Angrosino, 2007; Blackman & Featherstone, 2010; Parviainen, 2010). According to Pink (2009), in doing a sensory ethnography, the researcher self-consciously and reflexively attends to and accounts for sensory information. For instance, attending to sensory information in the field entails taking notes when something just does not feel right or when an exchange between actors seems important. The researcher’s intuition is their “immediate apprehension” of what is going on and the relationship between research, the researched, and the activity of research implies that phenomenology is a “philosophy of intuition” (Giorgi, 2002, p. 9; Janesick, 2001, p. 532). A research project is aimed at responding to a gap in the signification of an experience and oftentimes that gap is discoverable in the *pas de deux* performed by intuition and creativity (Janesick, 2001).

In addition to observation, fourteen people who had been selected through the technique of purposive sampling were approached for interviews. Although purposive sampling is non-random, it differs from convenience sampling in that the researcher

relies on his or her judgement to select research participants based on the qualities that the participants possess (Etikan et al., 2016; Guarte & Barrios, 2007; Marshall, 1996). The selection was informed by knowledge of the research area accrued from observation, and the participants reflect the demographics of Rhodes University with a majority of them being African and female (Matthews, 2015). Interview candidates were sought on the basis that they had been registered at Rhodes University for more than five years at the time of the interviews (2017) and the rationale for this was that they had been students at Rhodes prior to the outbreak of student activism in 2015, during and shortly after the protest wave.

Prior to interviews, there were a number of questions, informed by the background and context, which were prepared and designed to provide structure to the interviews. However, each interview had a character of its own as it accommodated digressions and often followed up on reflections or statements made by participants. For instance, what a participant said was often repeated as a question or followed up with a “what do you mean?” There were instances of “tell me more about...”. Whereas Agrosino (2007) states that the semi-structured aspect of the interview should naturally follow the open-ended aspect of the interview, the interviews that inform this study often started out structured and then became open-ended. Interviews took place in public spaces such as local coffee shops, the Rhodes University library and grounds. All interviews were recorded by the ‘voice memo’ app on the researcher’s smartphone and they lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. They were subsequently transcribed verbatim without the assistance of convenient software applications (apps).

### *Spontaneity and the Emergence of Protest Action*

It has been argued that protest action is part of the repertoire that disgruntled individuals and groups use to communicate preferences and interests as claims or demands (McAdam, 1986; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 1993). The manner in which they protest varies and protest repertoires are both historically situated and spontaneous (Anisin, 2016; Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Georgsen & Thomassen, 2017). Tilly (1978) argues that protest has been significantly routinised through the expansion of civil society organisations and social movements. However, when spoken of, spontaneity either refers to the behaviour of a group of actors in their subversion of the available and institutionalised dispute resolution mechanisms by engaging in informal protest, or on the other hand, spontaneity refers to and is contingent on factors beyond the scope of the interests and preferences of a group of actors. In their analysis of the 2012–2013 rape protests which occurred in parts of India, Chaudhuri and Fitzgerald (2015) privilege the lack of identifiable interest groups and decentralised decision-making as creating room for spontaneity in protest events. Similarly, Polletta (1998, pp. 136–141) argued for spontaneity emerging in cases where there appears to be “a lack of bureaucratic planning” which, in turn, produces radical action outside of the institutionalised norm. Whereas Sitrin (2009) has argued that on-the-go horizontal decision-making is a strategy in itself, the likes of Aelst and Walgrave (2001, pp. 476–480), Chaudhuri and Fitzgerald (2015) and Rosenthal and Schwartz (1989) view spontaneity as rare for it is only triggered under certain conditions.

To historically situate the re-emergence of protest at Rhodes University, research participants were asked whether there was a political culture prior to the emergence of protest in March 2015, to which some of the participants responded:

Um ... no, not really. I don't think ... not that I was aware or involved. It didn't feel like there was one. (Interview with Amie)

No. not at all. There was nothing ... I don't remember. (Interview with Reggie)

On campus?!? I wasn't politically active anywhere because I had decided that any alliance-related politics are not for me. (Interview with Bo)

No, actually. I wasn't politically inclined to join SASCO [South African Students Congress] or DASO [Democratic Alliance Student Organisation], but when I got here in terms of the political climate it was virtually non-existent even though the students have SRC elections and all of that. (Interview with Somila)

Somila, a research participant, mentions two student organisations and the Students' Representative Council (SRC) which, historically, have organised meetings and protests in South African institutions of higher education (Koen et al., 2006). At the time of the re-emergence of protest, there was no national student union which represented student interests to the extent that NUSAS purportedly had in historically white institutions during apartheid (Mckay, 2015) and none of the aforementioned student organisations initiated the protest action which the participants took part in.

In the absence of an organisation of student interests, recent studies into the emotions of protest posit that certain events or situations, referred to as 'moral shocks', often raise a sense of outrage which is addressed via collective action (Jasper, 1998; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). At the time when research participants embarked on their first protest performance, it was widely reported that they did so in response to and under the influence of the actions of Chumani Maxwele, who threw faeces at the then statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT) (Pett, 2015). The statue in question, however, had been subject to numerous acts of defacement prior to the events of March 2015 and those did not lead to wide-spread collective protest; thus, a sense of outrage is not sufficient cause for collective protest action (Knoetze, 2014; Olson, 1971).

Moreover, resource mobilisation scholars posit that prior to protest action, there must be the generation and adoption of an injustice frame.

A misfortune must become conceived as an injustice or a social arrangement must become viewed as unjust and mutable. In each case, a status, pattern of relationships, or a social practice is reframed as inexcusable, immoral or unjust. (Snow et al., 1986, pp. 466, 475)

At the time of the emergence of protest performance, there had been no political climate which would propel individuals to identify with the organisation of student interests or sufficient outrage to bind individuals in a network of outrage, and as a result, the participants had no frame with which to "locate, perceive, identify and label" occurrences, events or situations as justifying protest action prior to its occurrence (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).

Instead, a significant number of research participants claimed that they had been drawn to attend some of the political activities<sup>1</sup> which occurred between 2015 to 2017 due to the atmosphere and vibe of the protest:

It's ... it's ... the atmosphere is electrifying cause you are gravitating towards other people coming together ... the singing, the dancing, the demands they are making. You gravitate towards the entertainment value of being involved in the protest. Cause you see the people are chanting and singing. It's interesting and it's lively. (Interview with Hefe)

I didn't even know the words of the songs initially, but I wanted to join in ... it's like ... The vibe. You can feel it. It's so fun. (Interview with Asande)

It's a lively atmosphere. So certain people gravitate towards that atmosphere – not necessarily they like what's being said, but they just like the atmosphere around the student protest. (Interview with Bo)

To understand how one feels an atmosphere, there needs to be an enquiry into how that atmosphere is constituted through an image that gives a sense of being in that atmosphere (Brennan, 2004). This calls for a protest event analysis that “goes into the moment” to reveal “the lived immediacy of experience” offered by the atmosphere of protest (Pred, 2005, p. 11 in Thrift, 2008, p. 16). In approaching the atmosphere of protest, consideration is given to the idea that “protest almost always assumes an audience, onlookers for whom the events are ‘played out’” (Kershaw, 1997, p. 260). As such, Asande, a research participant, stated that she was initially a bystander to protest, watching the gathering of bodies, and heard the tuning of protest songs and then subsequently joined the protest. The interest is the encounter of the bystander body with the performance of protest which propels them to transcend from an observer to an actor in protest. Since protest is made up of singing and movement, it is what has been traditionally considered as a performance and hence it will now be imagined as protest performance.

### *Choreographies of Protest Performance: From Protest Song to Movement of the Body*

Performance is often contested for being an elusive term; for instance, it can be argued that “any event, action, item or behaviour can be examined ‘as’ performance” (Schechner, 1998, pp. 361–362). This entails both what has traditionally been thought to be performance, e.g. theatre, music, dance, art, etc., which often is rehearsed for desired effect; that which is socialised through the repetition of norms and fear of sanctions, such as being “in place”; and “a wider range of human behaviours” which burst out of improvisation (Roach, 1995, p. 46). Since the early 1990s, performance has enjoyed a privileged status in the turn to embodiment prior to representation (Butler, 1997; Thrift, 2004, 2008). Judith Butler’s work on ‘performative behaviour’ spearheaded an engagement with performance in “... places and situations not traditionally marked as the performing arts such as how people play

1 Political activities can include, but are not limited to protest, marches, rallies, meetings, occupations etc.

gender, heightening their constructed identity, performing slightly or radically different selves in different situations (Schechner, 1998, pp. 361-362).

Performance involves relations, interaction and participation between two or more bodies that constitute the performance (Fischer-Litche, 2008, p. 32). Whereas some literature places emphasis on the physical co-presence of bodies, it is common for some bodies to be an imagined other, contributing to the overall performance in absentia (Goffman in Burns, 1992, p. 112). On the one hand, performance is the art of the present; a constellation of forces that is ephemeral and disperses as soon as the event is consummated (Martin, 1998, pp. 188-189; Thrift, 2008, p. 136). Thus, performance is infamous for its ephemeral status for as the body transitions between postures, there is the creation of a passive present by the future present of the next posture which becomes the vanishing point of the just occurring posture (Siegal, 1972).

To follow the immersion of body into performance, the performance is opened via song. The effects of song have been researched through experiments conducted in a controlled environment or through a musical anthropology of how people use music to construct their social reality. In the former, research participants who do not perform or create music have been asked to rate the arousal, valency and dominance of short video or audio clips through observation, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (Christensen et al., 2016; Sokhadze, 2007). Following this, it has been argued that through contagion, imagination and expectation, “music has the potential to induce collective affective phenomenon, such as behavioural, physiological and neural changes, in large groups of people” (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 91).

How do musical effects manifest outside of controlled quantitative research experiments? One of the contributors to the 2010 *Body and Society Journal on Affect*, Hendricks (2011, pp. xvii-xviii) proposes that listening and noticing call for “a practical methodology where sound is subject, a vehicle and a medium for thinking” and to do so, *Sonic Bodies* encourages a “thinking through sound” instead of “thinking about sound”. In the African Noise Foundation’s published documentary *Decolonising Wits*, styled as ‘Decolon I Sing: Wits’, Kaganof (2015) captures a number of protest songs in duration of which two are sampled below to draw out the structure of protest song during the 2015 student activism in historically white institutions:

**Caller:** ‘*Senzeni Na?*’ (What have we done?)

**Responders:** ‘*Senzeni Na? Senzeni Na!?*’ (What have we done? What have we done?!) x 4

**Caller:** ‘*Sono Sethu ...*’ (Our only sin ...)

**Responders:** *Sono Sethu Bubu’mnyama*’ (Our only sin is that we are black)

**Caller:** *Aya’ncanzela* (They are trembling)

**Responders:** *Aya’ncanzela* (They are trembling)

**Caller:** *Aya’ncanzela* (They are trembling)

**Responders:** *Aya’ncanzela* (They are trembling)

**Callers and Responders:** *Aya'ncanazela Amabhunu/Amabhulu Ayebulale uChris Hani*  
(The Boers who killed Chris Hani are trembling)

**Caller:** *Uthi' Masixole Kanjani?* (How are we supposed to forgive/ be at peace?)

**Responders:** *Uthi' Masixole Kanjani?* (How are we supposed to be at peace?)

**Callers and Responders:** *Uthi' Masixole Kanjani Amabhunu/Amabhulu Ayebulale uChris Hani*  
(How are we supposed to forgive/ be at peace when the Boers killed Chris Hani?)

The above transcripts illustrate that the structure of protest song, and by extension, its performance, are characterised by repetition. What is repeated makes it possible to compare and contrast the traction of some protest songs as against others; to evaluate the degree of intensity that carries the performance of protest song in one space and not another; to distinguish the tone used or rhythm built when particular songs are played or sung and not others; and to follow schemas used to constitute the performance of protest.

Whenever a protest song is sung, it is at the discretion of its performer to select a particular chant and tempo, but most South African protest songs are short in length and have two main parts – that of a caller and that of responders (Kaganof, 2015; Mbuli, 1996; Ngema, 1992). The antiphony begins with a leading voice asking or stating something which the rest of the group repeats or confirms back to him or her (Kaganof, 2015; Mbuli, 1996; Ngema, 1992). Although protest song is structured by the antiphony, a number of those featured in the Lee Hirsch (2003) documentary *Amandla: A revolution in four part harmony* state that in duration, there is no universal order of protest song and the manner in which the crowd follows or unfollows the song being led is spontaneous. The caller may employ the schema of serenade, which entices the audience and invites it to participate in the potential of song. An invitation can be accepted or rejected in a number of ways: song might be ignored, song might be followed and the audience may reject the initial caller by following a different caller which changes the song in duration. This is typical of “songs of persuasion” which appeal to the listener and attract them into their duration (Denisoff, 1966; Vail & White, 1978; Widdess, 2013).

According to participant reflections, upon hearing a song there was a common ‘feeling of the atmosphere or vibe’ which propelled actors to gravitate towards the site where the song was being performed. Theories of emotion would suggest that a state of feeling illustrates an emotions schemata, for only when the subject becomes aware of itself does it produce “human actuality” which is personal and biographical (Damasio in Wetherell, 2012, p. 35). Moreover, the process of event evaluation, through which the feeling or sensation becomes perceived, has to be checked against previous experiences and represented as the said state of feeling (Scherer, 2004, p. 244; Shouse, 2005, p.1). Indeed, a relation of feeling speaks to how the dynamics of an event are felt and it is a perception of the atmosphere or vibe of protest (Massumi, 2002; Phillips-Silver & Trainor, 2005). What delineates feeling as an emotion, however, is when it is appraised. That is, the feeling only becomes subjective after the fact of its actualisation.

Prior to its actualisation and at the time of emergence in its liminal becoming, the feeling is not only viscerally sensed, but it opens the body to variation in its capacity or power to act and change in any direction, which is the manifestation of affect (Georgsen & Thomassen, 2017; Lobo, 2013; Massumi, 2002). The theory of affect offers several propositions as to how the body acts on certain potentials and not others. Deleuze and Guattari (1987), in their interpretation of Spinoza, posit the body actualises potential in becoming that which increases or decreases its capacity to act. Massumi (1995; 2002) interprets the movement of intensity as an event perception that is automatic, and prior to event appraisal, thus speaking to the unconscious away from psychoanalysis. Similar to Massumi, Thrift (2004; 2008) argues that there is a story to and a logic in the movement of the body that is prior to representation but can be assembled from performances and practices. The body, which varies in power or capacity to act, implicates an event of the somatic nervous system (motor expression in the face and body) (Massumi, 2002; Scherer, 2004). The somatic nervous system receives and relays information through exteroceptors, interoceptors and proprioceptors (Moore & Yamamoto, 2012, p. 13). The first, exteroceptors, receive information via the five senses of vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste, which is passed on to the second, interoceptors, to accept, ignore or modify by the third, proprioceptors, which orientate the response to be carried out as motor activity (Moore & Yamamoto, 2012, pp. 13-14).

In those who transcend from being a spectator of the performance to an actor in the performance, the imperceptible rhythm of song is received by distant senses of hearing and oftentimes vision, which is then resolved in ways that increase the body's capacity to act. The resolution of imperceptible forces and intensities can show forth as

... automatic reactions, non-conscious, never to be conscious remainders, outside of expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration. [They are] narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalized body surface.

(Massumi, 1995, p. 85)

The body displays and embodies a rhythm in the duration of song through which the face nods, smiles, frowns, sighs, manoeuvres the tongue to whistle, ululates, looks up and down, expresses joy and sadness, etc. (Kaganof, 2015). The intensity moves down the body; starting with the placement of arms in an infinity cross underneath the breasts with the thumbs touching the flesh inside the elbow bend and the four fingers resting on the lower part of the upper arm, to the opening of the arms, drawing in the elbows towards the abdomen, bringing in the hands to momentarily clap in front of the body or the reaching of the hands overhead initiating or following synchronised clapping. Once overhead, the formation of fists by the hands swaying back and forth, the shifting of the body weight from the left side to the right side parallel to the fists above or the hands clapping and fingers rhythmically snapping. There is often the lowering of the upper body to give the lower body ease to waddle back and forth or to rhythmically stomp the feet in one place, followed by the lifting of the feet to a 90-degree angle to fire out knee kicks, full body jumps, and the take-off from one space to the next – a movement through which the participants march in



formation while being used by the song and in turn using the song to communicate with one another. If the song is losing momentum, it is common for a participant to bolt to the front of the crowd or to the middle of the circle if the crowd is in a semi-circle or circle to lead a new song and to motion the crowd to sing their parts back to them (Kaganof, 2015).

### *Protest Performance as Recruitment to Activism*

Earlier literature on activism has failed to account for the emergence of spontaneously organised relations between bodies. It merely argued that when it was there, it organised collective minds in the instances of haphazard decision-making and strategy, but as it plays out in choreographies of protest it signals a kinaesthetic intelligence which is not only a sense of movement, but orientates the movement forms that sustain or amplify the intensity of protest. The immersion of bodies in protest performance is self-referential as the participants did not join the protest due to an adherence to the structure of song, an “intense identification with the values of an organisation” or the “pre-existing organisation of preference structures” which has been said to “dispose an individual towards participation” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1236; McAdam, 1986, p. 64; Oberschall, 1973). In choreographies of protest, the body receives and conveys rhythmic properties; participants initially observed and then attended to the atmosphere through movement in their improvisation of a shared point of contact, such as rubbing their elbow with one hand while the other is drawn to their chest when standing which is improvised to clapping of hands in formation with the collective body. Participants often stated that they were not aware of the complexity of their movements, but rather were ‘going with the flow’ during an uncertain and ambiguous moment. The lack of divergence from the atmosphere, referred to as ‘going with the flow’, becomes interesting because although the movement was spontaneous and improvised, it either sustained or amplified the intensity of the atmosphere or vibe that was initially encountered. According to those who study human kinaesthetics, spontaneous movement has form because in its emergence, bodies evaluate exteroceptors and interoceptors, make necessary proprioceptive adjustments and relay responses which appear as coordinated motor activity (Gardner, 1983, in Parviainen, 2010).

Relations of encounter are premised on somatic dialogue between actors through which the body assumes a passive and active role, listening and receiving the frequencies of other bodies through multiple sensory orientating systems and responding to them or initiating movement which is then listened to and received by other bodies (Albright, 1997; Henriques, 2011; Stahmer, 2011). Whereas Thrift (2008) proposes there is a certain identity in entrainment to a common mood, Polletta and Jasper (2001) advance that collective identity might be based on the connections one has to members of a group. Once somatic dialogue has been developed through subsequent performative acts in choreographies of protest, which have been attributed with fostering the imagination of an alternative reality, referred to as utopia, to the ‘world out there’ (Kershaw, 1997; Moore & Yamamoto, 2012). This has played out in the displacement of space via the expression of unity as difference in human shields, die-ins, and occupations. What can be gathered is that the coming together of bodies is productive for it obliges individuals to protest along with or on behalf of

bodies in performances of protest; individuals in protest become invested in the contact and connections which bind them and the somatic dialogue between actors does develop as a preferred affinity of interest for the actors of protest performance. Thus, in an instance of protest performance, unity of movement bypasses socio-linguistic schema in recruiting individuals to activism and such recruitment occurs as a response to and as a product of the communication between bodies.

### *Conclusion*

Although the operation of power in society can be observed in the collective embodiment of the ideologies which keep bodies in place, the liminal and performative emergence of movement of the body creates difference in space through relations of encounter which transgress the ordering of bodies by breaking with the structure of the previous context and norms of place. The movement of the body, in the atmosphere of protest, is an event through which the body rejects the previously held image of being in space by adopting, through embodiment, a new movement image of becoming in place. Becoming a protest performer is a somatic event whereupon rhythm of song triggers a relation of feeling which is resolved by the extension of the body and is imagined as one of the primary means through which bodies are recruited into participation in activism. Such participation is deduced from the ‘going with the flow’ of movement during an uncertain and ambiguous movement. Thus, protest performance is in response to being affected by the atmosphere in ways which implicate sensation and movement as an effect of the encounter with the socially constructed space. When the body in motion is positioned as a sign of agency in relation to the imposition of structure in norms, rules and regulations, and laws about ‘being in place’, it becomes clear that the movement under consideration is not just any movement; it is the type of movement that breaks away from structure by becoming liminal and performative. The difference in-between before and after in space-time images is accomplished as the creativity of movement produces social space – a performed becoming in space.

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